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BG

SUBJECT: CODEL MCCAIN DISCUSSES ELECTIONS, CLIMATE CHANGE,
TRADE AND MUMBAI ATTACKS DURING BANGLADESH VISIT

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Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

11. (SBU) A Congressional delegation led by Senator John McCain emphasized the need for Bangladesh to remain on the path to free, free and credible elections. During a brief December 2-3 visit, the bipartisan delegation also highlighted the importance of political parties working together after elections, a critical message in Bangladesh's winner-take-all political environment. Senator McCain, along with Senators Joseph Lieberman and Lindsey Graham, discussed economic development, climate change and trade issues with key Government of Bangladesh leaders. Government and media warmly welcomed the Senators' visit, which occurred as the country prepares for national elections December 29. END SUMMARY.

CODEL McCain's Whirlwind Visit Pays Off

12. (SBU) Senators John McCain, Joseph Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham of the Senate Armed Services Committee visited Bangladesh December 2 - 3 in a trip truncated by a previously unscheduled stop in New Delhi following the Mumbai bombing. Bangladesh's Chief Adviser, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, hosted a breakfast in the CODEL's honor early December 3. Bangladeshi participants included the Foreign Adviser, three other members of the Council of Advisers, the Army Chief, the Principal Staff Officer (CJCS equivalent), the heads of Bangladesh's two intelligence agencies, and members of the Chief Adviser's personal staff. In addition to the three Senators, CDA a.i., CODEL Staff, and Embassy Officers also participated in the breakfast. Prior to their departure for Bhutan, the Senators held a brief press conference at the airport, which was attended by all of Bangladesh's major media outlets and which received front page coverage the following day.

GOB Meeting

13. (C) During the breakfast meeting, the Chief Adviser highlighted Bangladesh's success in social development, predicting the country would attain all of the Millennium Development Goals. He noted Bangladesh's success in achieving gender parity in education and discussed progress in utilizing micro-credit to lift borrowers out of poverty. The Chief Adviser also focused on the important role played

by the garment industry in Bangladesh's economy. More than simply generating export earnings, the industry also provided employment to over three million women and is essential to social progress for women. In this context, he stressed the importance of market access and asked the Senators to support pending legislation to allow an increase in Bangladeshi garment exports to the United States. The Chief Adviser and his colleagues expressed appreciation for USG assistance following the November 2007 super cyclone Sidr and highlighted the challenges the Caretaker Government (CTG) had faced during its tenure.

14. (C) Senators McCain and Lieberman expressed concern about the impact of global climate change in Bangladesh, noting they had introduced legislation in the U.S. Senate to address this new challenge and help developing countries affected by rising sea levels. The Chief Adviser expressed appreciation for these efforts, noting that a one meter sea level rise would inundate one-third of Bangladesh's land mass and displace over thirty million citizens. Senator McCain reaffirmed his commitment to free trade and promised to look for ways to respond to Bangladesh's request for greater market access. The Senators also praised the CTG and Army success in responding to natural disasters and complimented all involved for their success in registering 80 million voters.

15. (C) In response to a question from Senator Graham, the Chief Adviser said he hoped Pakistan would respond to requests to cooperate with the investigation into the Mumbai attacks. The Chief Adviser encouraged the USG to play a role in helping countries in the region to enhance their cooperation in fighting terrorism.

16. (SBU) The Senators asked about the potential impact of the global financial crisis on Bangladesh. The Chief Adviser acknowledged concerns about reduced flows of remittances, since these funds had become a catalyst for local

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development. The Advisers pointed to the increasing role played by Bangladeshi immigrants in the United States and noted that they now accounted for almost \$1.5 billion in annual remittances. Overall remittances from Bangladeshi workers overseas topped \$8 billion in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2008, and Bangladesh's total GDP stands at \$70 billion.

17. (SBU) The Chief Adviser invited Senator McCain and his colleagues to return to Bangladesh, including with their families. The Senators complimented the Chief Adviser and his colleagues for their contributions over the past two years and expressed support for efforts to hold free, fair, and credible elections by the end of December. All agreed on the importance of bipartisan cooperation after elections, with the Chief Adviser lauding the example of the United States, where legislators worked across the aisle on issues of national concern.

Press Event

18. (U) In their statement to the press, the Senators reiterated key themes from their meeting with the Chief Adviser, in particular the need for free, fair and credible elections. Senator Lieberman called for a peaceful return to democracy in Bangladesh, noting Senator McCain's gracious and unifying concession speech after the U.S. elections. Lieberman expressed "hope that after this spirited election is concluded here in Bangladesh that leaders and members of both parties will come together for the good of the people of Bangladesh and the future of this proud and progressive country."

19. (U) The Senators, whose visit received broad and positive media coverage, called Bangladesh "a good news story," citing

accomplishments in voter registration, gender equality and education. They also spoke of climate change and asserted that the global economic downturn provided all the more reason to tackle the issues that cause climate change and their economic roots. Senator McCain condemned the recent Mumbai attack as an outrageous act of terrorism and called for international cooperation to fight radical extremism. The Senator closed the press event by talking of his adopted daughter, who was born in Bangladesh, and the Senator's wish to visit to Bangladesh with her sometime in the future.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Bangladesh enthusiastically received Senators McCain, Lieberman and Graham, who were the first members of Congress to visit Bangladesh since 2004. The Senators and Advisers found common ground on economic development and climate change. Media and Government interlocutors whole-heartedly welcomed the Senators' statements about democracy and bipartisanship. While there was no opportunity to meet politicians during the brief stop, the Senators' message was clear and well-covered by the media in a country where many are ready to break with the highly partisan politics that have marked this nascent democracy. We hope the political parties get this message as well.

¶11. (U) CODEL McCain cleared this message.

PASI